

# What the Public Asks About Astrobiology

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Students and the public submit questions to “Ask an Astrobiologist” on the NAI website, where I answer them individually. During 2004, 150 answers were posted, typically each one paragraph of 100-150 words, written at an upper-school level, often with reference to a website or trade book for further information. From the nature of the questions, it appears they come about equally from students and the general public. We discourage questions that are obviously class assignments, such as “In less than one page, give 5 reasons why Mars might be suitable for life”. Although the subject matter is wide-ranging, the most frequent questions asked during 2004 dealt with life on Mars (not surprising given the MER publicity), the Miller-Urey Experiment (a subject included in many high school and college biology courses), and the necessary requirements to support life on other worlds. As illustrations of the variety, the five questions received during the week this abstract was written are: Could advanced life such as trees have evolved to exist in the northern polar regions of Mars (I think I see evidence for them)? What is a lipid? With featherdusters, a tubeworm, if they come out of their tube will they die? What precautions are taken to prevent planetary probes from carrying microbes from Earth to Mars and giving a false positive concerning extraterrestrial life? I would like to know how many planets there are in our universe apart from the 9 that are known, and how many other universes are known about?